Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*: Frank's Transformation

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Introduction

Frank Alpine, the protagonist of Malamud's second novel *The Assistant*, has a double personality. Brought up in a Catholic orphanage, he has a desire to be a person like St. Francis of Assisi, the priest that loved poverty so much and also restrained his sexual desire: "Every time I read about somebody like him I get a feeling inside of me I have to fight to keep from crying."[1] On the other hand, he has his bad self who aspires for crime:

> At crime he would change his luck, make adventure, live like a prince. He shivered with pleasure as he conceived robberies, assaults —— murders if it had to be —— each violent act helping to satisfy a craving that somebody suffer as his own fortune improved. (84)

These two selfless and selfish selves are always fighting inside Frank Alpine, and more often than not his bad self wins in the earlier stages of the novel. Yielding to his evil desire, Frank agrees to rob Morris Bober's grocery store. Although he later regrets for having robbed it, he keeps on stealing from Morris after he has become the assistant to the poor grocer. Besides, in love with Morris' daughter Helen, he spys on her when she takes a bath. In fact, his love is more like a lust rather than a love.

Frank continues to be self-centered until what he has been doing to Morris and Helen comes to a serious pass: they both tell him to go away —— Morris, because of his stealing; Helen, because of his forcing himself upon her. At this stage, Frank, whose hero is St. Francis, cannot live up to his ideal at all. His bad self, which prevents him

from doing so, is stronger, for it is given support to by his worldly desire to be a success. To him, it seems quite natural to have this desire, because the pursuit of happiness often means that of external success in the society that he lives in. He wants a college education, although he has missed the chance for it. In spite of the fact that he has failed many times in his life and let himself be a bum, Frank thinks that he deserves a better life than the one that he is now leading:

> But one day. . . he had this terrific idea that he was really an important guy, and was torn out of his reverie with the thought that he was living this kind of life only because he hadn't known he was meant for something a whole lot better —— to do something big, different. He had not till that minute understood this. In the past he had usually thought of himself as an average guy, but there. . . it came to him that he was wrong. (84)

Since this worldly desire is very strong, it affects him in that he thinks too much of results. He wants to be a success by a fair means or foul —— all he cares about seems to be the result. (Actually, having failed in every other attempt to rise in the world, he resorts to crime, and breaks into Morris' store.) This could mean that the process of reaching the result is not very significant to him. As a matter of fact, however, this way of thinking turns out to be a great mistake of his: he is ordered to leave by Morris and Helen, both of whom attach more importance to processes than results.

The Assistant is the story of Frank Alpine's transformation. The Frank that we find in the earlier stages of the novel is very much concerned about the external success. He changes in this respect in the course of the novel, and later we find him selfless, free from this concern. He comes to think highly of the internal, spiritual aspect, throwing away his worldly desire. This desire, or the abandonment of it is the key to his change. How the desire and the change are connected with each other will be discussed in this paper.

Frank's emphasis on results is clearly seen in his attitude towards his customers: he does not mind cheating them. One day Frank even suggests to Morris that he should use a couple of tricks on his customers because his profit is small. Astonished, Morris says, "Why should I steal from my customers? Do they steal from me?" (78). Apparently, there is a large discrepancy between Frank's values and Morris'.

To Frank, the profit seems to be all that counts. If he can earn a lot of money, it means that he is an able person. He eagerly wants to prove it to himself, for he has been failing to do so in the past. He worships St. Francis, and while talking with Sam Pearl, the candy store owner, he says that the saint enjoyed and loved poverty like a beautiful woman. However, Frank has revealed that he is the same kind of person as Sam, who says, "To be poor is dirty work" (31). Since he thinks of profits only, the way to make them does not matter, even if it can hurt people. What is important to him is that he can feel he is a great person. In this respect he is selfish.

The reason why Frank keeps on stealing from Morris is basically the same. Again, he wants to prove to himself that he is a capable person who can commit a crime. This is such a deep-seated desire that it is no easy thing for him to give up. In fact, he feels good when he steals:

> He continued to steal. He would stop for a few days then *almost with relief* go back to it. There were times stealing made him feel good. It felt good to have some change in his pocket, and it felt good to pluck a buck from under the Jew's nose. He would slip it into his pants pocket so deftly that he had to keep himself from laughing. (78, emphasis added)

Since he does this to please himself, Morris' feelings are of secondary importance. Frank often feels pricks of conscience about what he is doing to Morris, who has been very kind to him. However, even in such cases, his desire to show himself that he is an able man is so strong that he justifies himself:

> He had nothing to be ashamed of, he thought —— it was practically his own dough he was taking. The grocer and his wife. . . wouldn't have it if it wasn't for his hard work. If he weren't working there, they would have less than they had with him taking what he took. (64)

This way of justifying himself is, as we can see, completely based on his record of performance. According to this logic, as long as he earns much money, whatever he does can be justified.

In his selfishness, Frank is no different from Julius Karp, who does not hesitate to betray Morris, or tell lies in order to justify himself. When he lets another grocery open near Morris' in spite of his promise not to, Karp says to him, "[H]e'll sell more delicatessen but you'll sell more groceries. Wait, you'll see he'll bring you in customers" (15). However, later Karp himself reveals that what he has said is a lie. He says to Morris, who thinks that his business has improved because of Frank, "Your store improved because my tenant Schmitz got sick and had to close his store part of the day" (138). Just like Karp, Frank proves himself unworthy of Morris' trust, and in addition, tries to justify what he has done. Morris, who cannot accept Karp's values, no wonder rejects Frank's. Morris, being hurt, chooses not to let him work in the store again, although "he felt unhappy to lose his assistant and be by himself" (152) again.

To Morris, unlike Frank, profits are only of secondary importance. Honesty and charity are more significant to him. He sells some things on credit to a drunken woman who he knows will never pay him the money. Besides, when he writes down the sum, he reduces the amount to $1.61 from $2.03, so that his wife will not nag: "His peace —— the little he lived with —— was worth forty-two cents" (8). He also opens the store as early as around six in the morning, in order to ensure a Polish woman some bread, which only costs three cents. In short, Morris wants to be helpful to his customers. In fact, this is the reason why he runs the grocery. To be of service to his customers is more important to him than the result, that is, the profit. This

way of thinking is completely different from that of Frank or Karp. While Morris sells "life-giving milk" [2] and food, Karp, only concerned about making money, "makes his living selling brain-destroying alcohol" [3] after he has obtained the license for the sale of alcoholic drinks probably in a dishonest way. To sum up, Frank and Karp attach great importance to the external, while to Morris it is the internal that counts.

Frank's attitude towards Helen can give us another example of his obsession by external success. It seems that Frank's ultimate goal is to have sex with her, by which he wants to prove to himself that he has won her love. In other words, he assumes that it gives him an undeniable fact, which he so badly needs, that she loves him. If he does not have it, it means that he does not have enough charm, and that she does not love him very much. Therefore, he *must* have it. This way of thinking gives support to his lust. In fact, one day, when Frank peeps on Helen in the bathroom, "instead of the grinding remorse he had expected to suffer, he felt a moving joy" (71).

Frank's emphasis on the external takes another form in his relationship with Helen. He is always trying to appeal to her that he is not an average person. Education is very highly regarded in the society that they live in. Frank takes advantage of it in order to impress her with how great a person he can be. He often tells her about his ambition and plan to go to college, although we have no idea where he is going to get the money. He also gives her a leather copy of Shakespeare's plays, but it is doubtful if he himself is interested in them. He only uses these things to win her —— more precisely, it is not Helen herself but sex with her that Frank really wants. In order to achieve this goal, he is eager to make himself look greater than he really is. Iska Alter has rightly pointed this out in her book:

> Because he wants something from her and not Helen herself, he tells her what he senses she wants to hear. In fact, all of Frank's actions at the beginning of the novel are for an ulterior purpose, not for the doing of the actions themselves. . . . [4]

It can even be said that Frank is trying to use Helen in order to build up a great image of himself.

Helen is different from both Frank and Morris. She wants internal integrity in the first place, but she also needs external success. That is why she cannot appreciate Morris' moral values to the full, for he does not earn enough for his family to live on. That is also why she is attracted to Nat Pearl, who is a brilliant law student, and why she has had sex with him. However, since Nat is a person who uses his academic career only as a means of establishing worldly success, Helen is hurt and deeply disappointed. Actually, "Nat. . . regards Helen as an object to be acquired and used." [5] Therefore, more than ever, she wants Frank to cherish her feelings and internal integrity:

> I said I slept with somebody before and the truth of it is, . . . I'm sorry I did. . . . I suppose I felt I wanted to be free, so I settled for sex. But if you are not in love sex isn't being free, so I made a promise to myself that I never would any more unless I really fell in love with somebody. I don't want to dislike myself. (125-26)

Frank's attitude, however, presents a great contrast to her values: he proves himself to be the same kind of man as Nat is. Being a person to whom results are so important, Frank is very disappointed when his presents to Helen are rejected. Becoming desperate and even blaming her for not accepting them, he thinks that she *should* like him because he has bought such expensive things for her. This is no more than self-satisfaction on the part of Frank, which makes it possible for him to neglect and hurt Helen's feelings. This is most obviously seen in his demand for sexual intercourse. Helen is being attacked in the park by Ward Minogue, when he comes to her rescue. For rescuing her, he assumes that she is grateful to him, and convinces himself that he is entitled to have sex with her. Just as he has tried to justify his stealing, this is the justification of his desire to have sex with her. The judgement is completely based upon the fact of his

rescuing her —— an external achievement. Frank, ignorant of Helen's feelings, forces himself upon her in consequence. This is intolerable to her, who thinks highly of the internal aspect in her relationship with him.

Thus, Frank has failed in his relationship both with Morris and Helen. His mistakes are caused by his obsession about the external achievement, by which he can persuade himself that he is a man of ability. Now he tries to become free from the obsession, and it entails the denial of his desire to be successful.

II

Rejected by Morris and Helen, Frank realizes what he has done to both of them is really wrong. In fact, at heart, he has been feeling from the very beginning that his stealing from Morris and his sensual desire for Helen are no right things. Once he tries to justify his stealing "only to find himself remorseful" (64). Before spying on Helen, he tells himself that "if you do it, . . . you will suffer" (69). Sometimes he is even proud of his "worrisome conscience" (141):

> . . . at times he had liked having the acid weight of it [conscience] in him because it had made him feel he was at least different from other people. It made him want to set himself straight so he could build his love for Helen right, so it would stay right. (142)

This conscience, which has always been fighting against his self-centered, worldly desire, causes conflicts in Frank Alpine. In other words, he suffers from "the gap. . . between what he is and what he ought to be." [6]

When Frank's selflessness overcomes his selfishness, he becomes uninterested in the results. His attitude towards his customers, Morris, and Helen is very different from before. The internal aspect is more important:

> . . . he felt a sort of gentleness creeping in. He felt gentle to

> people who came into the store, especially the kids, whom he gave penny crackers to for nothing. He was gentle to Morris, and the Jew was gentle to him. And he was filled with a quiet gentleness for Helen and no longer climbed the air shaft to spy on her, naked in the bathroom. (79)

Before he is told to leave, he has been unwilling to let his selflessness become prominent because of his desire to be a success. For a person who works in Morris Bober's grocery, it would be impossible to be a selfless person and a worldly success at the same time. It is true that he has had pride in his "worrisome conscience." However, it has only resulted in somewhat masochistic thinking because he has so often failed to achieve his goal: "When I don't feel hurt, I hope they bury me" (105). It is Frank's too much concern about the external that has made him think this way.

However, he now repents. He changes in that he is free from this concern, and attaches more importance to the internal. Frank even does the same thing that Morris would do to his customers who are in trouble: he releases a man from debt. When he is hard up for cash to meet expenses, Frank thinks that he will collect an old bill from Carl, the Swedish painter who owes Morris over seventy bucks. He goes to Carl's apartment, but seeing his wife who "was young but looked old" (169), his children, and the small, shabby apartment, he feels sorry for them, and "figured he would cut the bill in half if the painter would pay up the rest" (169). Moreover, witnessing the poor diet that they live on, Frank runs back to the store, grabs the three dollars that he has hidden under the mattress, and returns to Carl's house. If Frank were only interested in the benefit, as he was before, he would never be able to think of giving money to him.

The change of his attitude towards Helen can be seen in his wish to give her college education, which she so badly wants to have. Not only does he try new things in the grocery to earn more, but also he works part time in a coffee shop at night so that there will be enough money for her school fees. Moreover, he does not attempt to gain Helen's favor by telling her that he works so hard for her. Instead,

he keeps it secret. He does not care whether Helen knows how hard he has to work or not.

Frank's attempt to give Helen college education is not self-satisfaction at all on his part. He demands nothing from her. He just tries to give, and besides, it is what *she* really wants that he tries to give. This is, actually, self-sacrifice. Spending the money for her college education means that there will never be any money left for *his* college education. If he wanted to be a worldly success, it would be impossible for him to do this. In reality, he does it, giving her desire priority over his. He wants so badly to be of service to Helen that when he comes up with this idea, he is really excited:

> The idea of doing something for her seemed as futile as his other thoughts till one day. . . he had a thought so extraordinary it made the hair on the back of his neck stiffen. He figured the best thing he could do was help her get the college education she had always wanted. . . . But where. . . could he get the money unless he stole it? The more he pondered this plan, the more it excited him until he couldn't stand the possibility it might be impossible. (208)

This attitude is totally different from his attitude towards her in the earlier stages. Now that he has thrown away his worldly desire, he can be selfless.

The reason that Frank wants to be of service to Helen is not selfish, either. He wants to be forgiven at any cost for having forced himself on her, for now he can attach importance to her feelings, and knows how wrong what he has done is. He wants to heal her hurt, and helping her get the college education is the only way to do so that he has come up with.

Conclusion

Frank Alpine is deeply affected at first by the prevalent ideas of the society. The society that Morris, Helen, and Frank live in is "an aggressive society addicted to the pursuit of externally determined

success, not its internal reality. . . ." [7] Frank seeks for worldly, external success. This makes it impossible for him to be honest, selfless, or charitable because then, most probably, he will not be much of a man in a worldly sense. Thus, although he has a better self who worships St. Francis of Assisi, Frank cannot appreciate it fully. However, being ordered to leave by both Morris and Helen after his stealing and forcing himself upon her respectively, he realizes that what he has done is absolutely wrong, and repents. He does not really repent of his stealing or his sensual desire until then, for he has succeeded in convincing himself that they are somewhat OK. It is Morris and Helen's emphasis on the internal aspect that enables Frank to find out that his values are totally wrong.

After he finds this out, Frank, who has struggled to be good, who so much "wished for better control over himself" (126) although he has failed many times, succeeds in discarding his desire to be a success. This is the key to his change. Being free from his worldly desire, he is able to let his selfless, good side prominent. Frank Alpine, called "St. F." (217) at the end of the novel, has finally become a person like his hero, St. Francis. By choosing to be good, Frank is sure to suffer from poverty, but he does not care. His conversion to Judaism, of whose teachings Morris Bober is the embodiment, symbolizes his acceptance of suffering. "The moral individual," as one of the critics says, "must do what is right regardless of its effect or lack of effect. If society considers morality to be synonomous (*sic*) with immaturity, so be it." [8]

Notes

1 Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 31. All the following references to *The Assistant* are to this edition and figures in parentheses refer to page numbers.
2 Jeffrey Helterman, *Understanding Bernard Malamud* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), p. 42.
3 Helterman, p. 42.
4 Iska Alter, *The Good Man's Dilemma: Social Criticism in the Fiction*

of Bernard Malamud (New York: AMS Press, 1981), p. 25.

5 Alter, p. 13.

6 Peter L. Hays, "The Complex Pattern of Redemption," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, eds. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 229.

7 Alter, p. 9.

8 Edward A. Abramson, *Bernard Malamud Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 27.